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King's Son Escalates Assertions

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That U.S. Plotted to Kill His Father

By Michael A. Fletcher
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The statement was so bold that it left some longtime associates of the late Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. cringing. Dexter King declared on national television that his family believes James Earl Ray is "innocent" in his father's assassination. He went on to say that President Lyndon B. Johnson must have been part of a government plot to kill the nation's foremost civil rights leader.

King's stunning assertions, aired recently on ABC's "Turning Point" news program, added fresh fuel to a controversy that has simmered since Ray recanted his guilty plea three days after entering it in 1969.

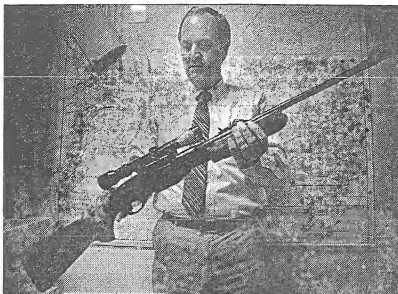
For years, many people—including Ray's attorneys, close associates of King, and the chairman of the congressional subcommittee that examined the crime and concluded that Ray was the lone gunman—have said that Ray did not pull the trigger or, at minimum, did not act alone in stalking and killing King. Some, noting late FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover's well-documented hatred and harassment of King, have long suspected government complicity in the assassination.

But until now, none of those theories has drawn the attention that has accompanied the King family's surprising entry into the case after close to three decades of silence. In March, Dexter King visited Ray in his prison hospital and told him that his family believes he is innocent. King's widow, Coretta Scott King, backed a request by Ray's attorney for new ballistics tests to be done on the rifle thought to have killed King, although previous ballistics tests have proven inconclusive.

The tests, which involve newly developed technology, are a key element in Ray's latest bid to win a trial, which is pending in a Memphis court. Earlier this month, Ray's lawyers requested permission for a second round of test-firing. Court officials in Memphis would say only that the results are expected shortly.

"Six or seven times Ray's request for a trial has been through the court system and been dismissed quickly and quietly," said John Campbell, the Tennessee prosecutor who has contested Ray's efforts to win a trial since 1993. "But the King family's involvement has made this different. It is a real mystery to me that they have been so silent for so long. Now, they are going public and taking such an extreme position."

"This is disturbing," he added. "I



1991 FILE PHOTO
Ben Holley, supervisor of the property and evidence room in Memphis, holds the hunting rifle allegedly used by James Earl Ray to kill Martin Luther King Jr.

believe we got the guy in prison who belongs there."

The Kings, who refused interview requests, apparently have embraced the complex conspiracy theory laid out in court papers and a book published in 1995 by Ray's current attorney, William Pepper. In the book, "Orders to Kill," Pepper asserts that King's assassination was the culmination of a far-reaching government plot involving local police, the FBI, the CIA and military intelligence.

"I believe Pepper got to Dexter and won him over," said the Rev. Joseph E. Lowery, a longtime King associate, who discounts large parts of Pepper's theory but believes Ray did not act alone in the assassination. "Dexter's been baptized in Pepper's pool."

David Garrow, a historian who won a Pulitzer Prize for his biography of King, called the King family's foray into Ray's case "irresponsible" and their charge linking Johnson to the crime "obscene."

"It's sad," Garrow said. "I think inescapably, the primary reason this has developed as it has is because neither Dexter King nor any of his siblings know very much at all about the assassination beyond what they have heard from Mr. Pepper."

In his legal attempts to win a trial over the years, Ray has offered numerous theories on the circumstances surrounding King's murder. Once, he said it was a plot hatched by King's own inner circle. Other times he has asserted that he was just a patsy set up by a mysterious figure he knew only as "Raoul"—a figure some believe never existed.

"James Earl Ray has had many

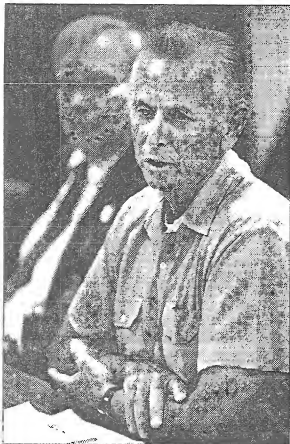
opportunities to tell us the truth," said Jesse L. Jackson, who was with King when he was gunned down by a sniper as he stood on a balcony at Memphis's Lorraine Motel on April 4, 1968. "But James Earl Ray never got beyond Raoul."

Despite Ray's credibility problems, his latest request for a trial has taken on a sense of urgency and won the support of the King family in part because he is suffering from terminal liver disease. Ray, 69, has been in critical condition several times in recent months and many fear that when he dies he will take secrets with him.

"Nobody in his right mind could believe that James Earl Ray, who never did anything right in his life, could pull off the assassination of Martin Luther King," said Lowery, who in 1957 co-edited the Southern Christian Leadership Conference with King. "Nobody has ever been comfortable thinking James Earl Ray was the lone gunman. But now Ray is about to die and he may be the last hope for the truth."

Ray was arrested two months after King was killed. His fingerprints were found on the alleged murder weapon, and he pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 99 years in prison in March 1969. But three days later, he recanted his plea, saying he was pressured into it by his lawyer, Percy Foreman, who told Ray he was likely to get the death penalty otherwise. Later, Ray said that he was convinced Foreman would throw the case if he insisted it go to trial.

Ray's activities immediately before and after King's assassination have convinced many that he must have had



FILE PHOTO BY MARK HUMPHREY—ASSOCIATED PRESS

help. Ray, who had escaped from prison a year before the assassination, was able to flee to Canada, London, Lisbon, and back to London, before his capture. Before the assassination, he was able to stalk King in Los Angeles, Selma, Ala., and Atlanta.

"How could this petty thief do all of that?" Lowery asked.

In 1979, a 2½-year congressional investigation concluded that Ray did kill King. The report also said that it was likely that Ray was part of a conspiracy, but not one involving the government. The congressional committee speculated that Ray might have been involved with a group of racist businessmen who had placed a bounty on King's life, but said it could not confirm this because the key members of the group had died.

"There has been nothing that has developed in the 20 years since we completed this investigation that would in any way alter any of our findings," said Rep. Louis Stokes (D-Ohio), who chaired the House select committee that investigated both King's assassination and that of President John F. Kennedy.

In its report, the committee harshly criticized the FBI for its program to discredit civil rights leaders, including King. For years, the FBI monitored King's telephone conversations and bugged his hotel rooms. The agency

once sent King a letter hinting that he commit suicide or risk having the FBI expose derogatory personal information allegedly gathered about him. But even with that, the committee found no evidence of government complicity in King's death.

"It is to think the unthinkable to suggest that the president of the United States was involved in the assassination," said Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.), a civil rights veteran who often worked with King and believes Ray did not act alone. "I do not share that. But there were many people in government who disliked Dr. King."

But rather than end speculation surrounding King's assassination, the committee report and its vague conspiracy reference only provoked new questions. Former D.C. Del. Walter Fauntroy (D), who chaired the subcommittee that probed King's assassination, is among those who has come to believe that Ray did not kill King.

"I agree with the family that James Earl Ray did not fire the shot that killed Dr. King," Fauntroy said. "And I do not believe that he himself knows the full story of what happened on April 4, 1968."

In his book, Pepper laid out what he billed as something approaching a full story. He said that military intelligence officials, already nervous because of riots that had swept the nation, had

grown alarmed at King's opposition to the Vietnam War and his plans to lead a poor people's march on Washington. Then, in cooperation with the CIA, FBI and Memphis police, they dispatched a contract killer and teams of military snipers to back him up. In the process, they set up Ray to take the fall.

But key elements of the story were discredited during the ABC broadcast. At one point, correspondent Forrest Sawyer produced Billy Eidson, a retired Army officer whom Pepper had said led an Army unit that was in Memphis and poised to kill King if the first assassination attempt failed. Pepper had said that Eidson had been killed as part of a coverup.

The holes in Pepper's story have not altered the position of the King family. "Due to its sensitive nature, information and evidence showing government involvement in Dr. King's assassination can only be shared in a court of law," they said in a statement. "The journey to truth is fraught with inconsistencies, but it is up to the truth-seekers to keep their eyes on justice. We continue to support all efforts toward that end."

Few believe that the growing interest in the King assassination will diminish anytime soon. Prosecutors in the case are bracing for 30th anniversary reexaminations they believe are certain to come next year.

The King estate in January signed a \$10 million multimedia deal with Time Warner to produce audio books of his speeches, an Internet site and a King CD-ROM, and to publish yet-to-be-written books by Dexter and Coretta Scott King. The estate also has made a separate movie deal with filmmaker Oliver Stone, whose 1991 "JFK" movie rekindled widespread interest in President Kennedy's assassination.

Also, former U.N. ambassador Andrew Young, who was a King lieutenant, has called on President Clinton to create a commission to reinvestigate the case. Meanwhile, the King family promises to push for a trial for Ray until the end.

"I do not believe in their hearts that they believe James Earl Ray was not the trigger man," Stokes said. "I think that they believe that all of the facts unknown to them and the American public about this assassination would somehow come out during a trial. They really would like to know positively who killed their father, and Coretta Scott King, her husband. That's understandable."